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ABSTRACT

The circumstances which give rise to or "trigger" an abuse incident have been given relatively little systematic attention. In analyzing the case records of all families (N=328) charged with child abuse over a ten-year period in a two-county area of Pennsylvania, all instances of family conflict were identified and the circumstances surrounding the incident determined. These circumstances were examined in relation to the type of abuse. Findings indicate that abuse occurs under circumstances that are relatively commonplace in families with children. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect were found to occur under somewhat different although not particularly unusual circumstances in families with children. Explanations for association of such commonplace circumstances with abuse are considered. (JMB)

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Circumstances Surrounding the Occurrence of Child Abuse*

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INTRODUCTION

In a summary of National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect research prepared recently by the staff of the Center for Community Studies at George Peabody College, the lack of research on the circumstances surrounding the abuse incident was noted. According to the report* there is a noticeable absence of research on the immediate circumstances surrounding an incident of maltreatment. To quote, "While current research provided a great deal of information about the background characteristics and routine circumstances of maltreating families there was no information on the events, or situations which might move a caregiver from routine functioning to an abusive behavior." (p. 126).

The importance of the question, "What happened?" is the supposition that something about the circumstances leads to the abuse.

The Simpkins, et al. report notes that no research was found on the topic and our own review of the literature confirms this. However, a recent PBS television documentary, "Raised in Anger,"** does describe what was happening in several families when abuse occurred. The parents in this documentary describe their experiences.

> One mother reported: "She was about 2 months old and colicky... She kept waking and waking and I kept giving her her juice bottles and I finally got back to bed thinking she was asleep for the rest of the night;... all of a sudden she started screaming again.. I had had it. I just had had it. I threw the covers off and went running down the hall screaming, 'I'm gonna kill that kid'."
>
> A father said: "One day I hear a ruckus out around the side and I came around the side and here's Brian and his buddy and I have my boat over here laying down... they used it as a trampoline and they were springing off this trampoline effect. Well I came

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*C. G. Simpkins, J. R. Newbrough, P. R. Dokecki, K. H. Dunlop, "Child Abuse and Neglect in Families: An analysis of family focused projects on child abuse and neglect funded by HEW's Administration for Children Youth and Families," Center for Community Studies, The John F. Kennedy Center for Research on Education and Human Development, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, June 1979.

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around the corner and I had a sizeable investment in the boat and a lot of emotional things wrapped up in the boat and I saw red -- I could have killed them."

A mother described: "When I came down there were eggs thrown all over the kitchen -- eggs everywhere -- all over the walls, on the floor, on the curtains, and I stood there and said, 'Oh my, get her out of there before I really give her a licking'."

A father describes: "In feeding him a bottle -- when he threw up on me I became enraged and I slapped him open-handed and the ring that I had on my finger hit his head and he had a brain hemorrhage and died."

The circumstances these parents describe -- the child's crying at night, children jumping on the bottom of a canoe, throwing eggs, the child's throwing up -- are all run-of-the-mill behaviors or misbehaviors. What do such circumstances have in common? On the surface, they are rather dissimilar and certainly not very dramatic. The children's actions are, in fact, rather common occurrences in most families with young children.

Our view is that the circumstances of the abusive incident are, on the whole, common occurrences in the majority of families with children. Their potency in instigating abuse does not derive from their uniqueness. Rather, such circumstances, confronted by parents on a continuing basis, may make some parents feel unable to control their children's behavior. If these same parents have the added feeling that they <u>should</u> control their children's behavior, their sense of inadequacy is further strengthened. For some, the way to cope with the threat of these feelings of inadequacy is to strike out at the child.

In the following report, abuse incidents are considered in relationship to their circumstances. Several questions are posed. Are the circumstances as commonplace as we have suggested? Is there anything about the relationships between circumstances and abuse which suggests the dynamics of the abuse incident? Finally, is there something in the circumstances surrounding the abuse which serves as a triggering mechanism to the abuse?

METHOD

A. Overview of study

The results reported here are from a study of all 328 families cited for abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, and life-threatening neglect) over a 10-year period in a two-county area of northeastern Pennsylvania. The focus of the overall study was the repetition of abuse and factors which relate to it. In this study case records of all families were analyzed, and interviews were done with those heads of household who would agree to be interviewed.

The present report is based on analysis of data from the case records. By means of this analysis, 3,833 incidents of combined child abuse, adult violence, and run-of-the-mill discipline were recorded. It is the reason the incident occurred that is the focus of the present analysis.

B. Measurement procedures

In the following material, two variables are examined. One is the reason for the abuse, the other is the type of abuse.

1. Reasons for abuse. The case record included a record of the reasons (up to two) for each incident. A tabulation of the reasons indicated 72 categories. In order to reduce this number, relatively similar categories were combined, as described below.

It is important to note that analysis of the reasons involves some inherent problems. First, there is a sizeable number of incidents with no reason specified. Second, there may have been inconsistencies among caseworkers as to whether the reason cited reflected their own judgment, what the parent reported, or what a person who knew about the incident reported. Third, there are also possible differences in caseworkers' skills in eliciting explicit answers from the families.

2. Abuse methods. A more detailed description of how an abusive incident was operationally defined is in preparation. Briefly, 86 different discipline or conflict methods involved in adult-child or adult-adult interactions were identified. The results of the interactions were also documented. The methods were sorted into several categories. The categories were: physically abusive regardless of result (e.g. burning), physically abusive depending on

result (e.g. hitting with a belt), emotionally abusive (e.g. threatening to kill), sexually abusive, life-threatening neglect, non-severe discipline, and accidents.

When the physical methods required a check of results, those which had an abusive result were separated from those which did not. The latter group became a category called "severe discipline." The two groupings of physical abuse were combined. Emotional abuse involved terrifying the child, isolating the child for prolonged periods of time, or threatening abandonment. This gave four types of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect. The sexual abuse incidents will not be examined here since there were only 46 such incidents and only 7 of these had the reasons given.

RESULTS

A. Frequency of all reasons

As was noted above, there were 72 different reasons cited in conjunction with all incidents involving children. The 3,370 incidents in which children were victims include both abuse and non-abuse. The top 10 reasons are given, in order of occurrence, in Table 1. In this list the child's "misbehaving" accounts for one-quarter of the reasons.

TABLE 1

Most Recently Cited Reasons for Abuse, Violence and Discipline from Among 72 Categories

	Frequency	Percent (N = 3370)
Child misbehaves	853	25.3
Drinking adult	209	6.2
Too much stress on adult	167	4.9
Parents/adults fighting	153	4.5
Adult angry	123	3.6
Adult head refuses to meet family needs	115	3.4
Adult disagreements	103	3.0
Adult effort to assert authority	101	3.0
Adult failure to provide supervision	100	2.9
Child crying/whining	77	2.3

In order to reduce the 72 categories to a more manageable number, similar issues were combined. A set with 31 categories appears most validly to present the reasons and has been designated as either "child-related" or "adult-related." The adult-related categories have been further differentiated into individual problems,

parenting problems, and conflict between adults. Table 2 lists the 31 categories and their frequencies.

TABLE 2
Frequency of reasons

Child-Related	Subtotal	Total	Percent
Misbehavior		879	20.7
Inconvenience (crying, bed-wetting, etc.)		173	4.1
Fighting/arguing		98	2.3
Immoral behavior		75	1.8
Aggression		63	1.5
Refusals		46	1.1
Dangerous behavior		32	0.8
Sexual behavior		9	0.2
Spoiled		6	0.1
	1,381		
Adult-Related: Individual Problems			
Stress		191	4.5
Anger		125	3.0
Drugs and alcohol		53	1.2
Sick - physically/mentally ill		52	1.2
	421		
Adult-Related: Parenting			
Supervision		151	3.5
Refuses to meet family needs		115	2.7
Asserts authority		101	2.4
Parent's lack of knowledge		76	1.8
Expectations		53	1.2
Unsafe home environment		46	1.1
Dislikes child		29	0.7
Use of medical facilities		24	0.5
	595		
Adult-Related: Conflict			
Fighting		153	3.6
Disagreement		121	2.9
Head leaves		32	0.8
Partner refuses sex; infidelity		23	0.5
Stop child abuse		9	0.2
	338		
Accidents	213	213	5.0
Other	15	15	0.4
No Answer	1,282	1,282	30.2
TOTAL		4,245	100.0

Since each incident could have two reasons given, an analysis of combinations of reasons is of interest. Table 3 lists reasons as child-related only, adult-related only, or a combination of both. Child-related only reasons were slightly higher in number than adult-related only reasons. There were relatively few child/adult combinations recorded.

TABLE 3

Frequency of Different Combinations of Reasons Associated With Incidents in Which a Child Was Involved

		Frequency	Percent
Child-Related only		1091	32.4
Adult-Related only		819	24.3
Parenting	(382)		
Individual problems	(261)		
Conflict	(81)		
Individual problems/parenting	(40)		
Individual problems/conflict	(5)		
Combination: Child/adult		159	4.7
Child/adult individual problems	(75)		
Child/adult parenting	(73)		
Child/adult conflict	(11)		
Accidents		133	3.9
Other		6	0.2
No Reason		1162	34.5
		3370	100.0

B. Frequency of reason by type of abuse

In Table 4 types of abuse have been separated and reasons tabulated by type. The lists of reasons are ordered from most frequent to least frequent. Physical and emotional abuse have several frequently occurring reasons in common. Neglect tends to be rather distinct in the reasons associated with it.

Adult use of alcohol and drugs, and stress on adult are common to all three types of abuse. Four reasons, child's misbehavior, child-created inconvenience, children fighting and arguing, and adult efforts to assert authority are common to both physical and emotional abuse. One possible implication is that because these most frequent reasons are common to several types of abuse, they provide no clear differentiation between the types of abuse. However, the opposite is possible, namely that such circumstances, because they are common to the different types of abuse, differentiate circumstances which result in abuse from those that do not.

TABLE 4

Frequency of 10 Most Frequent Reasons Associated With Different Types of Abuse

Child-Related	Adult-Related		Frequency
		Physical Abuse	
C		Misbehavior	171
C		Inconvenience	68
C		Accident	51
C		Fighting and arguing	45
	A	Drugs and alcohol	39
C		Immoral behavior	32
C		Refusals	29
	A	Stress	26
	A	Expectations	24
	A	Assert authority	21
6	4		
		Emotional Abuse	
C		Misbehavior	50
	A	Anger	23
	A	Assert authority	18
	A	Drugs and alcohol	12
	A	Fighting	12
	A	Head leaves	11
	A	Disagreements	10
C		Inconvenience	7
	A	Stress	7
C		Fighting and arguing	5
3	7		
		Neglect	
	A	Refuses to meet family needs	96
	A	Supervision	73
	A	Stress	50
	A	Parent's lack of knowledge	50
	A	Unsafe home environment	34
	A	Drugs and alcohol	23
	A	Use of medical facilities	22
	A	Accident	20
	A	Sick/physically or mentally	13
	A	Head leaves	9
0	10		

Six of the ten high frequency reasons for physical abuse are child-related, three of the ten reasons for emotional abuse are child-related, and none of the ten reasons for neglect is child-related. This may suggest that each type of abuse occurs in different family circumstances.

Physical abuse occurs largely in response to something the child does. Emotional abuse is weighted toward adult relationships. Neglect is solely an adult problem.

C. Correlational analysis: multiple regression

1. Overview of analysis

A multiple regression analysis was done in which all 3,833 incidents were included and several variables were controlled. Reasons were the dependent variables. The independent variables controlled were: child target vs. adult target; real vs. suspected abuse; identity of aggressor, i.e., male head, female head, or both; and the level of severity of the result. These are entered into the equation along with variables indicating the method of abuse.

In the analyses which are presented below, the reason associated with each abuse method is given. The reasons listed in the tables have statistically significant relationships to the method in question. Emphasis is on the variability accounted for by the relationship. This can be taken as an indication of the importance of the relationship. Where the variability exceeds 1%, the actual amount is given.

2. Physical abuse

Physical abuse, as Table 6 indicates, is associated with child-related refusals, fighting and arguing, immoral behavior, dangerous behavior, and inconvenience. The strongest relationships are with the first two. The predominance of child-related behaviors noted previously is even more pronounced here.

TABLE 6

Reasons Associated with Physical Abuse

	Physical Abuse Percent Variance
Child-Related	
Refusals	1.1
Fighting/arguing	1.1
Immoral behavior	< 1
Dangerous behavior	< 1
Inconvenience	< 1
Adult-Related	
Physically unsafe home environment	< 1

3. Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse, as indicated in Table 7, is associated with adult-related anger, fighting, and the head leaving the home. The most important relationship is with anger. While physical abuse seems to be instigated by activities of the child, emotional abuse seems, from these data, to arise from adult anger and conflict.

TABLE 7

Reasons Associated with Emotional Abuse

	Emotional Abuse Percent Variance
Adult-Related Reasons	
Anger	1.6
Fighting	< 1
Head leaves	< 1

4. Neglect

Neglect, as Table 8 indicates, has overall the strongest relationships to the different reasons. Among the child-related reasons, neglect is associated only with dangerous behavior. Among the adult-related reasons, neglect is related to several reasons. In order of importance, these are: lack of supervision, refusing to meet family needs, parent's lack of knowledge, parent's failure to maintain a safe home environment, inappropriate use of medical facilities, and experiencing stress.

TABLE 8

Reason Associated with Neglect

	Neglect Percent Variance
Child-Related	
Dangerous behavior	< 1
Adult-Related	
Lack of supervision	4.7
Refuses to meet family needs	4.6
Parent's lack of knowledge	2.1
Unsafe home environment	1.7
Inappropriate use of medical facilities	1.4
Stress	< 1

5. Other issues

Certain issues may cloud the present results. One is that more than one type of abuse is often found in a family. This means that in these families, if there are separate dynamics related to each type of abuse, they may be confounded with the dynamics of other types of abuse in the same family.

Second, in the correlational analyses the reasons which are related to the different types of abuse are among those with the lower frequency of occurrence. While we are inclined to think that the correlations reflect real relationships, were the frequencies higher we would have more confidence in them.

Third, approximately 1/3 of the 3,370 incidents related to children had no reasons indicated. For example, as noted above, of the 46 sexual abuse incidents, 39 had no reason indicated. Furthermore, there is a small but significant relationship between the aggressor being the male head and there being no reason given suggesting that male aggressors might be less likely to offer explanations of their behavior or caseworkers might be less likely to pursue explanations with male aggressors.

DISCUSSION

A. What then is the role of immediate circumstances in the abuse incident?

1. Physical abuse

Viewed from one perspective, the immediate circumstances of physical abuse are rather undramatic, everyday occurrences for any parent of young children. Viewed from another perspective, these commonplace circumstances can detonate a charge of adult emotion which may result in severe injury to the child. That such circumstances are aggravating, even a source of anger, can be vouched for by almost any parent. However, with most parents there is no charge of emotion so great and under so little control that it triggers abuse.

What is the origin of such a charge of emotion in abusive parents? Undoubtedly the etiology is complex, with experiences in the adult's own childhood, stress, and a variety of other factors contributing. However, considering the immediate situation, only some form of threat would be potent enough to elicit such an extreme response. To understand the nature of the threat, consider again the comments of the parents on the television program "Raised in Anger":

A mother states: "And then I started having like angry feelings toward Susan. I was shocked because I fantisized in my mind that I would always have loving feelings toward my children. I really thought children made you happy and gave you something -- I didn't realize that I would have to be the giver in a parent-child relationship."

A father describes: "If you feel inadequate as a parent then you want to minimize the things that are going to bring the inadequacies out. You want control and whenever the kids step out of that then you go and get them because when they step out of that box they have simply made you remember once again that you are inadequate and incapable of handling the situation."

Another father states: "I resented that I couldn't sit down to eat supper after working all day without him waking up and crying and I felt helpless to do anything about him -- about what he was doing -- I had no control over his behavior and I felt controlled by his behavior. I felt totally helpless and very much angry at my helplessness, so in retaliation I began to abuse David. I'd blow smoke in his face, startle him, drop him, yell at him, and I felt justified in doing that. I felt a sense of power in doing that. I didn't feel helpless anymore."

These parents indicate that they felt helpless to control the situation. One parent indicated that she felt she was not in control but should be. Being unable to control the child's behavior, the parent feels inadequate, even a failure. Such feelings are exacerbated when the parent is not receiving satisfactions that were expected from the relationship with the child. As one woman noted, she expected to be given something by her child but found the infant made only demands.

Thus the ingredients for threat and an explosion are present (1) when parents are confronted by a situation which results in a feeling of helplessness and an inability to parent as they feel they should, and (2) when anticipated satisfactions are replaced by unanticipated demands.

2. Emotional abuse

What about emotional abuse? It may be that the same processes are at work. However, if the circumstances found to be associated with emotional abuse are any indication, the source of the threat may derive more from adult relationships than from the behavior of the child. It may be that the adult feels inadequate and helpless in relation to another adult. The adult anger, adult fighting, and head of household leaving suggest such situations. The adult's emotional reaction may then be displaced onto the child. Efforts to assert authority over the child, including abuse, may be an effort to establish control over the child and thus reduce

the parent's feeling of helplessness. In "Raised in Anger," the parent responsible for the death of his infant son suggested just this.

3. Neglect

Neglect seems to involve yet another set of dynamics. Neglectful parents appear to abdicate the parental role. This may be the ultimate in parental helplessness. There is no struggle to achieve control over children or other adults -- only passivity in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

B. What are the implications for prevention of abuse?

A sense of control is in part a personality characteristic and in part a matter of skill. Efforts to improve parenting skills may prove to be helpful in reducing feelings of helplessness. Assisting parents to form more realistic expectations of themselves as parents and of their children may also reduce feelings of helplessness.

In addition, one senses that many abusive parents lack a strong sense of their child as an individual. Circumstances which intensify the parent's sense of helplessness may obliterate what little sense of the child as a person the parent may have. Thus, the circumstance of abuse is a threatened parent lashing out at a faceless child. Intervention aimed at clarifying the individuality of the child may be an additional focus for prevention of abusive responses to children.